The Durban Train: A Ten-Year Delay for the Planet? – by David Belis

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In a global context characterized by growing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and higher CO_2 concentrations in the atmosphere, there exists strong and increasingly convincing evidence that climate change is already having an impact in nearly all places on the globe and on a wide variety of natural and societal processes. When the Fifth Assessment Report (AR5) is finalized in 2014, the negotiations will be recalibrated in light of this new consensual knowledge base. As far as we can judge from the cumulative scientific evidence, attaining the 2°C goal will be highly unlikely unless there is a rapid and fundamental reversal in climate politics at the global level and in national policymaking. In fact, scientists of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change are calling for a peak in GHG emissions before 2020 and fast and deep cuts thereafter (IPCC 2007: 67). It is therefore no exaggeration to speak of this decade as the 'pivotal decade' in climate politics. A sense of urgency, hard and ambitious political commitments, the conclusion of a global deal, and practices of production and consumption adapted to the challenge are minimal requirements. This is beyond any doubt a daunting challenge and arguably one of a magnitude that humanity has never faced before.

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Since the Copenhagen summit in 2009, negotiations on climate change have continued during annual Conferences of the Parties (COPs) and endless technical working groups with, as major results, the inclusion of the Copenhagen Accord in the regular process and the launch of the Durban Platform, promising a new global climate deal to be negotiated by 2015 and enter into force by 2020. In the ongoing process of regime formation, the European Union, China and the United States are the key actors, and it is the interaction between these traditional and emerging powers that will define the global architecture of climate governance in the decades to come. At least five obstacles can be identified, however, for the Durban train to reach its eventual destination.

1. Firstly, the position of the US remains very difficult. It is hard to imagine that the country would be willing to accept any globally binding agreement during the next several years, regardless of the outcome of post-Obama or congressional elections. As long as the deeply embedded opposition to binding multilateralism remains a fact, and the power of socalled 'energy states' remains as strong as it is today in the political system, there is little hope for a large breakthrough. This immediately sets a limit on the expected outcome of global negotiations. A legally binding treaty with the necessary deep cuts in US emissions is not a realistic expectation. This means that the EU and China will have to be creative in forging a potential deal that is binding enough, yet acceptable for the US.
2. Secondly, although China has positioned itself diplomatically as the major developing country in climate negotiations (within the G77) it will have to take the 'big leap forward' and become a major leader in forging functional agreements that include major and binding commitments by emerging economies and/or middleincome countries. China's role of leadership in the coalition of the South (G77) will need to shift more convincingly towards visionary leadership on the role of these countries in global climate governance. Legitimate claims to discount the past (with historic high emissions in Western countries), and recognize different levels of development, should not obscure the fact that climate politics may be based on the past and present but are primarily aiming at the future. A climate agreement without strong commitments from China, India, Brazil, Indonesia, Turkey, Mexico, Thailand, South Africa, Argentina and a number of other countries is just as meaningless and *a priori* ineffective as one without the US. China, more than any other nonAnnex I country, realizes this and has the political weight to take the lead. Maturing diplomatic

relations with BRIC/BASIC (Brazil, Russia, India, China / Brazil, South Africa, India, China) and G20 countries will be crucial for this task (without suggesting that these are necessarily the fora that will be most effective).

3. Thirdly, China faces major challenges at the domestic level. The functioning of its current growth model leads to considerable social and environmental externalities, not least due to its large dependence on fossil fuels, with coal still accounting for 68.4 percent of total primary energy consumption in the year 2011 (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2012). The official discourse on environmental and climate change problems in China has changed dramatically over the last five years, though. The current FiveYear Plan (find the full English translation here) has materialized this in ambitious targets on some partial elements of climate change and energy policies. The ambition of the next FiveYear Plan should be the horizontal integration of climate change concerns in all of China's core development, economic, energy, agricultural, transport and material infrastructure policies. This requires serious reconfiguration of domestic politics, but is the only guarantee for credible steps forward and forms the basis for meaningful international engagement.
4. Fourthly, the position of the EU needs to be one of continued commitment to ambitious climate goals and innovative policymaking. The 202020 ambitions were only a first step and are in serious need of upscaling. The political process to bring 27 member states in line to do this is, within the EU context, at least as important as the EU's role at the global level. The embedding of climate goals in longterm policy trajectories leading to a lowcarbon society and resource efficiency by 2050 has been an important and ambitious political step (see Roadmap for moving to a low-carbon economy in 2050). This now needs translation into credible and ambitious targets for the decades to come. Further horizontal integration of climate goals in all of the EU's policy domains is a central element of this process. If the EU can take up this role, it will remain a leader in terms of policy development and commitment. This role is important as the EU is in and of itself a sort of laboratory for binding multilateralism. In addition, as one of the two large historic polluters, the EU has probably the largest leverage on the US. Climate diplomacy should figure high on the transatlantic diplomatic agenda. As the largest donor and trading partner for many developing countries, the EU is also in a position to use traditional instruments of trade and development in new and creative ways in light of future climate challenges for the developing countries.
5. Fifthly, both China and the EU – in addition to the US – will have to play a central role in the debates about the financial aspects of climate governance. In the current world order, it is no longer acceptable that the traditional Bretton Woods institutions, which reflect the postSecond World War balance of power, would play the central role in the financial climate regime. They are subject to decades of criticism from developing countries and need to be rethought and restructured to become acceptable as the backbone for climate financing. Global financial governance in light of climate change is part of the reconfiguration of global institutions in which

the US, the EU (more precisely its most important member states) and China all have their history and also their ambitions. Balancing those is an essential element of global climate diplomacy. This will necessarily include negotiations with the other members of the G20, and touching difficult issues such as legitimacy and transparency, as well as fairness, representation and effectiveness.

Besides these elements, it is important to understand that the global architecture of environmental governance and climate governance is increasingly questioned. Its incremental, slow and largely ineffective nature (for example the US *de facto* not included, and no successor agreement for Kyoto; the fact that emissions keep increasing) is reflected in 'expectation management' ahead of the COPs of the UNFCCC. Although this is politically understandable, reforming the process and regaining the momentum is a primordial task for both the EU and China if this pivotal decade for climate change is going to take the right turn. If after decades of socalled Pax Americana we are moving into a Pax Climatica, China and Europe, in addition to the US, will have to provide exceptional leadership. Extending bilateral relations and building effective policy cooperation are the key building blocks of such strategic partnerships.

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